

SOME PROVOCATIVE ASPECTS OF
THE ROLE OF THE EXECUTIVE IN ORGANIZATION

The following aspects of the role of an Executive were presented at a one-month Summer Institute for the Executive Development of Federal Administrators at the University of Chicago in August 1957.

"Beneath the general principles, attitudes, and ideals of "human relations" lie the actual tactics and day-to-day techniques by which executives achieve, maintain, and exercise power. In the current enthusiasm for democratizing administrative procedures, these hard, practical devices tend to be overlooked. Yet they exist just the same and, in many ways do not depart substantially from the scorned advice of Niccolo Machiavelli whose name has become a symbol of cynicism, ruthlessness and deception."¹

The social scientists begin their discourse on Executives by stating that we in this country have an instinctive revulsion against the term "power" but the fact is that administrators use power and exercise their ambitions just the same.

Administrators, whether in a line or staff capacity in business, government, education or the church, have power and use it. They maneuver and manipulate in order to get the job done and in many cases to strengthen and enhance their own position. The real question then becomes: How can power be used most effectively? Following are some of the political stratagems which the administrator must employ if he is to carry out his responsibilities and further his career. Research in this area has been avoided both by the student and the practitioners, as if there were something shady about it say the social scientists. The following facts were developed from a fairly extensive investigation of just how the executive functions in his political-power environment:

a. The able executive is cautious about how he seeks and receives advice. He takes counsel only when he himself desires it. His decisions must be made in terms of his own grasp of the situation, taking into account the views of others when he thinks it necessary. To act otherwise is to be subject not to advice, but to pressure; to act otherwise too often produces vacillation and inconsistency.

b. In many respects the executive system in any organization is composed of complexes of sponsor-protégé relationships.² A wise administrator makes it a point to establish such relationship with those above and below him. Every executive needs a devoted following and close alliances with other executives both on his own level if he is to enhance his sphere of influence. In addition they provide

¹ Martin and Sims Harvard Business Review (Vol. 34. 1956)

² Norman Martin and Anselm Strauss, "Patterns of Mobility within Organizations", Journal of Business, April 1956, p. 101

an informal organization through which the executive can learn at first hand how his decisions are being carried out, and what unforeseen obstacles are being encountered.

c. The wise executive maintains his flexibility. He ought never to get in a situation that does not have plenty of escape hatches. He should provide himself with transferrable talents and interorganizational alliances, so that he will be able to move elsewhere if the conditions in his current assignment become untenable.

d. During recent years emphasis has been placed on the necessity for channels of communications which run upward, downward and sideways. The researcher has found, as a matter of fact, that the able executive does not supply subordinates with maximum information. It is good strategy, say some, to withhold information or time its release especially with reference to future plans which may or may not materialize. The executive should be concerned with determining "who gets to know what and when" rather than simply increasing the flow of information.

e. The executive should accept compromise as a means of settling differences with his tongue in his cheek. While appearing to alter his views he should continue to press forward toward a clear-cut set of goals. It is frequently necessary to give ground on small matters, to delay, to move off on tangents, even to suffer reverses in order to retain power for future forward movement.

f. The executive is often urged to take action with which he is not in agreement. In such situations the executive may find it wise to use what might be called the technique of "negative timing." He initiates action but the process of expediting is retarded. He is always in the process of doing something but never quite does it or finally takes action when it is too late. In this way the executive escapes the charge of dereliction and at the same time the inadvisable program dies on the vine.

g. Many executives overlook the skill of artistic communication through self-dramatization. His non-vocal communications--impressions projected by his posture, gesture, dress or facial expressions--represent a potential asset for the administrator. Formal classes can provide the executive with control over his voice--its pitch, tone, color, speed, diction; training can do the same for the body--gesture, posture, and mime. He can develop sharper powers of observation through determining what made a particular conference or meeting effective. He should pay attention to how a successful man handles himself, not what he said or did.

h. Related to self-dramatization but not identical is the outward appearance of confidence. Once an executive has made a decision, he must look and act decided. The skillful executive will either produce the impression of certainty or postpone any contact with his associates in order to avoid appearing in an unfavorable light.

i. Warm personal relations with subordinates have sometimes been considered the mark of a good executive. But in practice an atmosphere of social friendship interferes with the efficiency of operation. The executive should never permit himself to be so committed to a subordinate as a friend that he is unable to withdraw from this personal involvement and regard the man objectively as an element in a given situation. If we care to assume that the traditional "open door" policy of the modern executive is good strategy, we must always ask the question: "How far open?"

The social scientist states that as we delve deeper into the study of political tactics in administration, the contrast with modern human relations, theory and practice, will stand out in even sharper relief. Mutual confidence, open communication, continuing consultation and participation by subordinates, friendship, and an atmosphere of democracy seem hard to reconcile with much of the maneuvering and power plays that go on in organizations everyday, be they government, business, civic or otherwise. We live in an era of "groupiness"; we are bombarded with admonitions which insist that everyone who is participating in an organization should have a part in the management of it. In the light of this trend, such terminology as "power", "maneuver", "tactics", and "techniques" appear disturbing when set down in black and white. But it is neither immoral nor cynical to recognize and describe the actual daily practices of power. They exist, say the researchers, therefore, we had better take a look at them and see what they are really like.